

Dek Unu Magazine

Fine Photography

June, 2019

Karen Hymer
"Age & Seduction"

All images ©Karen Hymer

Dek Unu Magazine

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Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven Images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

Dek Unu publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

Karen Hymer inherits much from the work of Julia Margaret Cameron. Both women's imagery steers away from the realistic or documentary and toward the personal and poetic. Rich textures and deep shadows, realized in hand-made images that focus on the world of women, tie their styles together in both appearance and spirit. Although Hymer's art, executed in polymer photo-gravure, starts in thoroughly modern digital form, it connects, in the end, to traditional etching and engraving, with prints pressed one at a time on fine art paper, each image showing a unique artist's touch. Her nudes are real, temporal, and human, shown clearly connected to nature and its seasons. Enjoy her work and words in this month's **Dek Unu**.

I was thinking about the effects time has had on my body and how, over time, my connection to place and the land has changed. I grew up in the desert collecting dead animals, dried plants and rocks. The desert landscape inspired me to seek relationships between the transformation of my own aging body and the processes of decay in the natural world.



Food & Flesh 1

My *Flesh and Food* series is influenced by the cookbook, *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses*, by Chilean writer, Isabel Allende. My images pair the body with foods believed to be aphrodisiacs. Allende states that food, like eroticism, starts with the eyes. My eyes are drawn to fruits and vegetables past their prime and to bodies that display the evidence of age. I cannot pass up a decaying fruit or vegetable. I find them beautiful and sensuous. By pairing them with the body I hope to create images rich in texture, tones, and seductive in nature.



I started including decaying desert plants and animals, emphasizing the interplay of texture, pattern, light and shadow, while working with the muted earth tones of the desert. It is my hope that these visual “remnants” - decontextualized close-ups of the human body and remains of plants and animals - reveal the subtle poetry of aging and decay and invite the viewer to see beauty in unexpected places.



Food & Flesh 5





Remnants 208

Living in a society that values youth and artificial / impossible / unhealthy notions of beauty is challenging when it is not achievable or particularly desirable.



I am pleased when other women view my work and see themselves in it. Many can relate to the difficulty of being a “woman of a certain age” in our culture that values youth and artificial notions of beauty above all else.



Food & Flesh 3



I have greatly admired the figurative work of Julia Margaret Cameron, Frida Kahlo, and Ann Noggle for most of my life. These women made amazing art at times when it was hard for women to be artists.

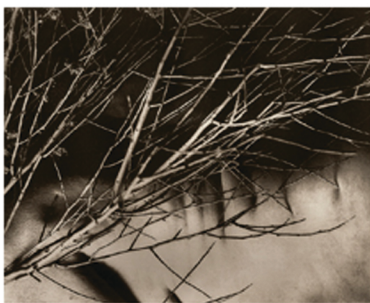


Remnants 280

Each of them worked in ways that were contrary to the popular style of her time. Cameron's soft focus, close-up portraits are intimate and emotionally expressive but they were not well-received during her lifetime. Kahlo did small self-portraits at a time when the Mexican muralists ruled supreme. Noggle brought older women to light with humor and respect.

I admire all three artists' inner strength to follow their hearts and make the work strong, emotional, and vulnerable.





Remnants 230

The photo program at Arizona State University was excellent, but it was not a good fit for me. I was doing self-portraits at a time when the work of the New Topographics (intentionally bland images of the human-altered landscape) was in full force.

But, at that time, I made one image that set me on my path as an artist. There was one negative I made that was very over-exposed, so the figure printed as distorted and ghostly. It was not what I had intended or expected but it had a beautiful, mysterious quality that was powerful. I submitted it to an exhibition and it was accepted. I realized it had the feeling I was looking for – it went beyond the simple descriptive qualities of the photograph.



In an undergraduate painting class at ASU, my professor was very encouraging and tried really hard to convince me to give up photography and stick with painting. I did find painterly illusion very seductive but realized I did not have to choose. So I continued to manipulate the surface of my photographic images with paint and also played with hand-coated, 19th-century photo processes. I always come back to the photographic image, but I don't call myself a photographer, I think of myself as a visual artist who uses photographic imagery along with other media.



Remnants 7





Remnants 11

At this time my favorite technique is photogravure. I love the look of etching ink on paper and the rich and varied tones it produces. I am seduced by the way photographic imagery is translated in this process – it is simply beautiful! Mixing the ink color, inking the plate, choosing from so many wonderful papers and then working the surface is very rewarding.



This series evolved in the studio, as performance in front of the camera. In most cases, I am the performer but I also photograph others over age 50. Using objects I collect, mostly from the desert, that relate to the passage of time and aging, I play with light, pose, and gesture and work intuitively.



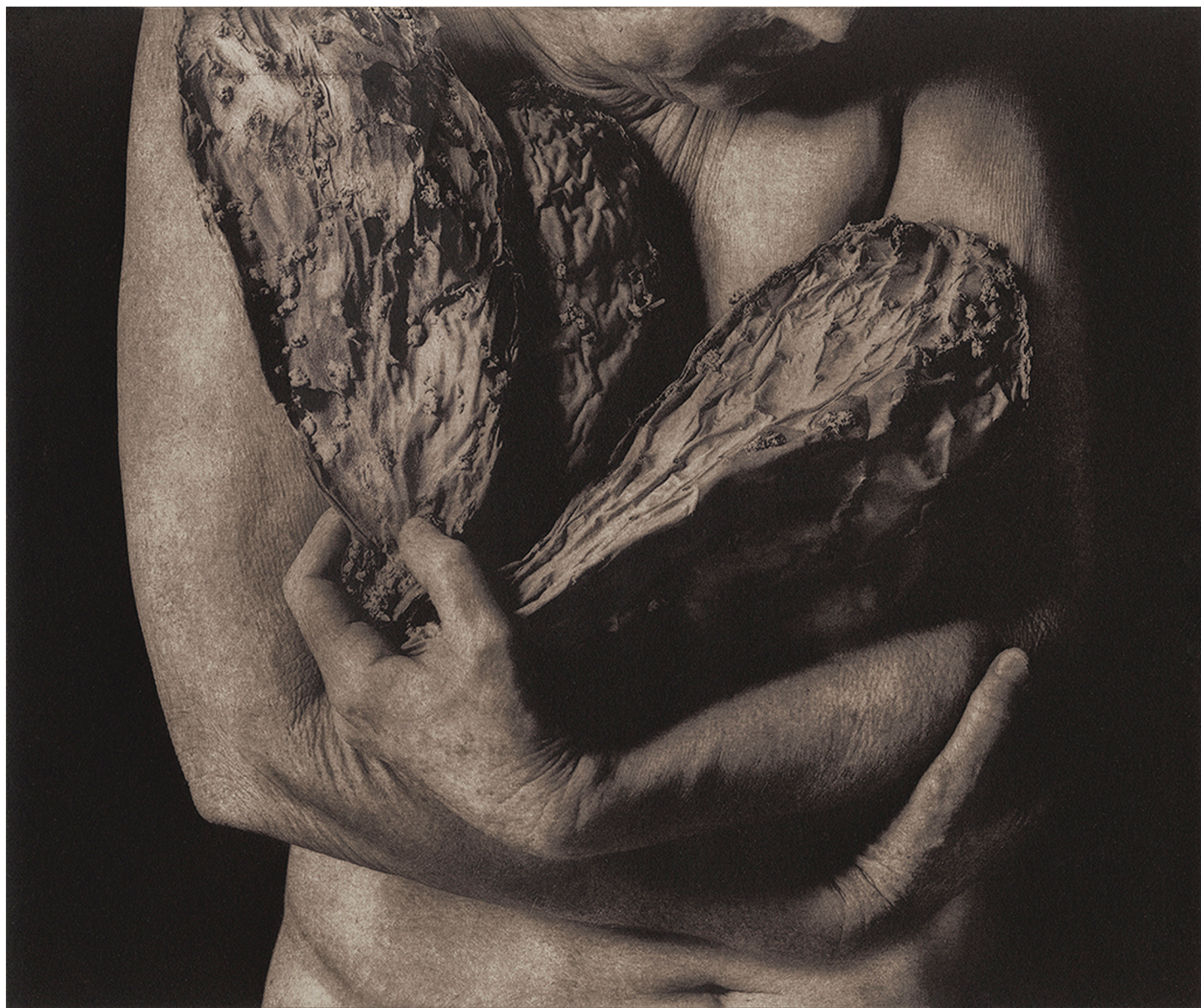
Remnants 4





Remnants 202

I work alone and show work to others only after editing and living with the images. Depending on the project, I do research and try to look at a lot of work; but, ultimately, I try to stay loose and let the images lead me. I think it is an important part of the creative process to work through things, to go with your instincts and keep pushing. Discovery and play is so important – stay out of your head and let the work speak to you.





Remnants 277

To find one's path, or, as Joseph Campbell said, to "follow your bliss" is a life-long struggle. I once had an instructor who looked at one of my series and said, "It has been done before." I never forgot that exchange because it left me feeling like my experience was not valid. At the time, I was young and it really stopped me from working. I felt like I had nothing to say because someone else had already said it. It took me a while to discover that everything has been done before, but not in the same way. We are all unique people with different life experiences and ways of seeing the world.



Artist Interview - Karen Hymer

Welcome to Dek Unu, Karen. Creative and mysterious images!

This series grew out of an exploration of my body that I started a few years back. My marriage of twenty-five years had ended, so my world had changed in most every way. Being single in my 50's led me to examine my aging body and my place in the world. My early images were extreme black and white close-ups of my skin, shot with my iPhone and then enlarged 32" x 32" and displayed in a grid of 4, so the final pieces were 64" x 64", floated on the wall. The images had a bit of a grotesque feel – sometimes reading as internal body organs of monumental scale. After I pondered them I decided I wanted the work to transition to images that were more poetic, still about the aging body, but visually beautiful and seductive.



© Karen Hymer

I am pleased when other women see themselves in my work. We struggle to accept our bodies the way they are – to rejoice in the evidence of our well-lived lives. Finding beauty in the details of our aging bodies brings us together in a shared sisterhood.

The response to my work by other artists whom I admire, of all genders, is very meaningful to me. Our work may not be similar but shared admiration means much to me.

Your training as an artist involved some serious rambling.

Well, I was a restless spirit and tried various schools. I started at an experimental college in Southern California called Johnston College, located on the campus of the University of Redlands. It was a wonderful place, but, after my freshman year, they cut my financial aid so I couldn't return. I drove cross-country with my roommate, lived on Long Island for six months, then returned to Arizona and attended ASU for a few years.

I moved east, lived on Martha's Vineyard for a year, examining my life and trying to figure out if I was committed enough to study art. Winter on the Vineyard was bleak and full of various temptations – so, during that time, I applied to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, in Boston, and went there to finish my BFA. I had never lived in a large city before and found Boston and the Museum School very exciting. I did miss the open spaces and light of the West so, after graduating, I moved to New Mexico. I next attended the University New Mexico, in Albuquerque, where I earned my MA and MFA.

I have always been interested in blending photography with other media, (paint, printmaking, encaustics), so the Museum School and UNM were good fits for me. I have always drawn and, during this time, made large mural prints incorporating paint and other media while also experimenting with sculptural forms. While I was in graduate school in Albuquerque, I worked for Kim Jew Studios, a very contemporary portrait studio. I learned a lot about lighting, pose, and gesture, all of which influenced my art practice.



As a teacher, do you remember your own teachers? Mentors?

Since I went to so many schools, I was fortunate to have studied with many excellent faculty in various disciplines such as art history, photography, painting and creative writing. I would list the following people as having helped me along my path, encouraging me to find my own voice: in high school – Sylvia Orman, Nancy Tamute and Errol Zimmerman; in college – Michel Landa at Johnston College, Bill Jay, James Hacjek, and Earl Linderman at Arizona State University; Bill Burke, Bonnie Donahue, and Sandra Stark at the Museum School; Betty Hahn, Tom Barrow, Patrick Nagatani, Nick Abdalla, and Douglas George at the University of New Mexico; and Dan Welden and Diana Bloomfield through workshops.

Anyone else who's noteworthy, helpful to you, or who deserves a shout out?



© Karen Hymmer

Most important to me are my family, my dog, Flash, and my wonderful group of female friends, fondly referred to as the "Desert Aunties." I feel surrounded by love and support from afar.

As they move on from your classes, what do you most want your students to take with them?

As a teacher, I consider myself a facilitator, providing guidance for my students. I encourage my students to look inside themselves, to seek out who they are and what of their life experience they want to share with the world in visual imagery.

I am very careful with my students and try to validate their experiences. In my teaching, I do show my work to my students and sometimes see them emulate the way I work or techniques I use. If their work is derivative of my work or another artist's, then I suggest they look at that work and learn from it. I encourage them to see how they can refine their images to make them more personal, more reflective of their own experience.

It is great to see students find their way and to see them grow as people and artists. I focus on developing good work habits and refining techniques. Some students don't get past the process aspect and that is ok, too. Not everyone will become a working artist – I truly believe art is good for everyone whether they dabble, collect, admire, or make artwork.

You say you are retired but it seems that you are still working pretty hard!

In May, 2018, I retired from teaching at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona, and moved to the small town of Silver City, New Mexico. A year earlier, I purchased a two-story, brick, 1905 building and have been renovating it. On September 1st, I opened Light Art Space, a gallery and teaching space in historic downtown Silver City. It is all quite exciting and new.



Sounds like a lot of work! Details?

Yes, my personal art-making has been on hold while I construct and establish the business, but I'm enjoying exhibiting my work and the work of others. While the gallery has a photographic focus, I am



© Karen Hymer

also exhibiting other media. Part of my mission is to show work of emerging artists and work that may not be shown in most commercial galleries. This June, the darkrooms (one black and white, one alternative process) and studio space (with printing presses) will be finished; so, I will start to offer workshops in photopolymer gravure and other processes. I also will be inviting other artists to teach different classes. I love this town and its people. I was seeking a smaller art community and feel very fortunate to have settled here. The gallery scene is vibrant and there are so many talented artists, musicians, theatre performances, and other events happening – too many to attend!

I look forward to interacting more with the community, especially with youth, through future programming and events.

Two analog darkrooms? One for alt-processes!

Most of the photographic processes I use originated in the 19th century. These early processes, (cyanotypes, van dykes, palladium and gum dichromate), all involve the use of light-sensitive materials and are “contact processes” which means they work from photographic negatives, which work in contact with photosensitive media, just like the earliest photographs.

You mentioned photo-gravure is your current favorite.

Gravure also originated in the 19th century, though the methods I use are contemporary. This process combines photography and printmaking. I make gravures using a commercially-made steel-backed plate with a light-sensitive polymer surface. I make a digital positive from my photographic image, lay the positive on the plate, expose it to ultraviolet light, and then develop (etch) the plate in water. The plate is then inked (like other etching plates), covered with a piece of watercolor paper, and run through a printing press. The print is considered an etching (or gravure) and editions can be made from the plate.

This all sounds quite technical - but that's not what attracts me to the process. I often wonder how in the world I became a photographer and not a painter! The real attraction for me is the handmade aspect of each image. I use digital technology but find it most rewarding when I can get my hands involved: painting emulsions on surfaces, mixing ink colors, applying color and other alterations (like wax), and experimenting.



With your history-consciousness, it doesn't sound like you are always after the newest gear or the latest upgrade.

I am not much interested in equipment – I use whatever camera or light source will do the job, though I do have a fondness for my old Diana's. In the past few years, I photograph mostly with my iPhone or Olympus digital camera. For the *Age & Seduction* series, I photographed in studio with strobes. I like to keep it simple so I usually use only one light, often a large soft box, with a fill card. My botanical series are often taken with the iPhone or made with a flat bed scanner.

The essential equipment items in my studio are my etching presses – a requirement for making photogravures. I have a small, older custom-made press and a 24"-wide Dickerson convertible electric press.

The months just ahead are probably going to be a bit hectic for you.

Currently, I am busy preparing for upcoming exhibitions at Light Art Space. Opening May 11th is "*5 Latinxs: Contemporary Work*". This exciting exhibition is of contemporary work by 5 Latinx artists: Natali Bravo-Barbee (New York), Ernesto Esquer (Arizona), Lesha Maria Rodriguez (California), Vincent Vigil (New Mexico), and Davey Miller (Arizona). These young artists address diverse issues ranging from immigration and colonization to identity, history, and the poetics of beauty. They work with a variety of media including photographic instant film

lifts, cyanotypes, mixed media, video and installation. Following that show is an invitation exhibition of alternative photographic processes. The gallery keeps me very busy!

In early June, I travel to the coast of Oregon to teach at Sitka Center for Art and Ecology. It is a beautiful environment with great students. When I return, I am looking forward to moving into the new studio and carving out time to create new work. I would like to return to a body of work I have been developing about invasive plants.

My *Age & Seduction* exhibition is available to travel, so I am seeking venues for it. I have also published a book, with the same title, published by Dark Spring Press. And, I am seeking gallery representation in Europe and the United States.

And your links so we can stay in touch?

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